

# The Grand Missed Opportunities for Change in the Modern Ethiopian Political History: Lesson to Be Learnt for Contemporary Democratic Transition

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One of the grand problem in the contemporary political history of Ethiopia is an incessant struggle for democratic transition and subsequent failures. Since the 1913, all the attempted hoped-for political transitions have been failed to bring democratic political order. Now Ethiopia has got another golden opportunity: a reform within EPRDF under the reformist prime minster Dr. Abiy Ahmed. However, the polemical question is whether the current democratic transition will success (bring democratic consolidation) or fail (reversion to authoritarianism). This paper, therefore, examined anatomy of missed opportunities for change in the modern Ethiopian political history with the intent of drawing the lessons to be taken into consideration from the past failures for current political reform the country has undergone. The study employed qualitative research approach in which data are gathered through document review and analyzed using critical discourse and historical narrative analysis techniques. The finding of the study shows that in all attempted hoped-for opportunities for change, the elite has followed a winner-takes-all-approach of politics than “a negotiated transition” based on win-win principled politics. Thus, all hoped-for-reform attempts are hijacked by the then elite aspiring hegemonic leadership, business as usual, and paradoxically it replaced new dictators who are more repressive and brutal than their predecessors. These historical legacies has also impacted the current transition the country undergone Therefore, this study suggests that there is a need to draw lesson from past failure: “decolonizing mind” and deconstructing a hyperbolically constructed invented myths that hindered societal transformation via epistemic community is an imperative to realize the country’s aspiration towards a democratic political order.

*Keywords:* democratic transition, democratic consolidation, Ethiopia, Elite hegemony, political transition

## Introduction

Ethiopia is an ancient polity with unbroken continuity of statehood shaped by myth and realities, stories of inter and intra wars, ups and down, hopes and despairs both at home and regional level. Ethiopia is epitomizer of “Africans hope” at the same time foreshadower of “African failure” (Sarbo, 2009), mythologizer of “African independence and self-determination” from white colonialism, but at home foreshadows of incessant struggle for self-determination and secession. Ethiopia is thus a State of myth and reality.

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The issue has become more polemical and intense since the creation of the present-day Ethiopia at the end of the 19th century. The state formation process was completed by Emperor Menelik II, former king of the Province of Shewa. However, his State formation process is interpreted differently often contradictorily: being viewed as nation-building, nation oppression, and colonization (Gudina, 2013). Even though the State formation project was completed by him, the State-building and Nation-building projects have not yet created a consolidated viable State. Rather the country is best epitomized as a contested State: *a State in the making*.

In this regard, one of the dilemmas that remain controversial is incessant hoped-for-reform attempts with a successful failure. Since the dawn of 20th century onwards, all attempted reforms have failed from the outset. Paradoxically, they created new dictators who are more brutal and repressive than their predecessors. Now Ethiopia has got another golden opportunity: a reform within EPRDF under the reformist prime minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. However, there is a collective fear that the transition will be part of the failed story. Here the polemical question is whether the current democratic transition will success (bring democratic consolidation) or fail (reversion to authoritarianism). This paper, therefore, examined anatomy of missed opportunities for change in the modern Ethiopian political history with the intent of drawing the lessons to be taken into consideration from the past failures for current political reform the country has undergone.

Methodologically, the paper used qualitative research approach in which data are gathered from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, proclamations, constitutions, reports, theses, and dissertations. It is analyzed through critical discourse analysis substantiated by “framework of elite hegemony”, developed based on Antonio Gramsci theory of hegemony and elite theory. Accordingly, the paper is organized into four parts: contending perspectives on contemporary Ethiopian politics, framework of elite hegemony, trends of missed chances, and lessons to be learnt with respect to the current reform.

### **Contending Perspectives on Ethiopian Politics and the Need for Alternative Framework**

The present-day Ethiopia with its shape and form is largely attributed to be the creation of Emperor Menelik II, former king of the Province of Shewa. However, Emperor Menelik’s<sup>1</sup> policy of empire building is interpreted on the one hand as policy of African version colonialism, on the other hand as a response to the “scramble for Africa”, and re-occupation of territories long previously subject to Ethiopian empire (Greenfield, 1965). On this account, there exist three contending often contradictory theses on which the country’s contemporary problems are interpreted, present Ethiopia is constituted, and solutions are forwarded. The three theses are Nation-Building thesis, National Oppression Thesis, and Colonial Thesis.

The three contending perspectives most often differ on the lens they used in looking at and interpreting the process of State building in Ethiopia, the major actors and their implicit and explicit intention, methods, and strategies they used, and the history itself. Moreover, the curative solutions they propose for the country’s political-cum-economic problems remains area of controversies.

Using a nation-building lens, the Nation-building perspective contends that the south-ward expansion of empire builders, most importantly Emperor Menelik II, is part and parcel of the process of re-unification of Ethiopian frontiers, restoring lost territories back to Ethiopia. In his letter to European countries, Emperor Menelik II wrote that “I shall endeavor if God give me life and strength to re-establish the ancient frontiers of

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<sup>1</sup> Though the modern Ethiopian history is traced to the day of coronation of Emperor Tewodros II, I used Emperor Menelik reign as a point of departure at least in terms of completion of State formation, the unfinished business of State-building and Nation-building.

Ethiopia” (Greenfield, 1965, p. 74). On such basis, proponent of this thesis strongly contends that Menelik II and other empire builders are “not colonizer”, participator of the “scramble for Africa”. Rather they bring territories back to Ethiopia that was subject to Ethiopian suzerainty formerly. In the campaign of re-unification, there is neither colonization nor domination.

Nation-building discourse is not a view blessed by colonial thesis. To the contrary, colonial perspective contends that empire builder’s expansionist policy is *Africa’s version of colonialism*, black colonizer of black nations. They interpreted Menelik II as participator in the “scramble for Africa”. Kumsa (2014, p. 1112, *emphasis added*) argues that “Abyssinian [a term used to refer northern Amhara-Tigray principalities] colonialism is the worst of conquest and colonial rule of all territories in Africa...elucidate the development of Oromo national struggle for regaining their lost independence”. At the climax level, they labeled what they call “Abyssinia Colonialism” as the source and genesis of Horn of Africa political crisis. In the same way, Jalata (2004, p. 87, *emphasis added*) contends that “some Habashas (to refer the Northern Amhara and Tigray) settled in Oromia, creating garrison towns and an Oromo collaborative class that helped to maintain Ethiopian colonialism”. Advocators of this thesis forwards independence as a last solution.

The third perspective is national oppression thesis. The narrative of National Oppression came to the political landscape of Ethiopia with 1960s Ethiopian Student Movement which was inspired by Marxism-Leninism philosophy (Gudina, 2013). The Movement used the term to denote their struggle against the old system, the monarchy, in the quest for social justice and ethnic equality. They understood Ethiopia as a museum of peoples but the system made the country a home of oppressed nations. In his article entitled “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia”, Walleligne Mekonnen (1969), a main player behind the student movement, raised the issue of Nationality.

National oppression thesis contends that in the long journey of the nation building process, there is oppression and subjugation, domination and exploitation on the bases of ethnicity and class. Those who regarded the problem as “question of class oppression” contend that class question should be addressed first (Tibebu, 2008). In contrary, those who interpret Ethiopia as “a prison of nations and nationalities” forward that question of nationality should be addressed first. At the end of the day, the nationalist front won the battle field and thereof the current Ethiopian polity is re-structured on the basis of national oppression thesis.

In the trinity of contending thesis, however, midway and mean is non-existent. They are in the path of opposing extremes. My point of departure is the opposing end spectrum narratives epitomizing contemporary Ethiopia problems and the solution being forwarded. Instead I attempt to develop a new conceptual perspective “framework of Elite Hegemony” based on Antonio Gramsci theory of hegemony and elite theory. I argue that the failure of building a viable state can be understood from elite hegemony perspective.

### **Towards Framework of Elite Hegemony: A Theoretical Perspective**

The existing literature on Ethiopian politics can fall under three perspectives: *Nation-building*, *Colonial*, and *Oppression thesis*. The colonialism-cum-oppression and nation building myths are thus among the hotly debated issues of Ethiopian politics. The three perspectives situate Ethiopian political-cum-national problem and solution at the opposite end continuum. Nevertheless, they downplay power politics, patron-clientelism, and elite interest in connection with the long journey of the “making and re-making” of Ethiopia. As a result, they remain opposing end of continuum. Thus, this paper moves onto analyzing elite and hegemony in light of Gramsci theory of hegemony and countering hegemony so as to offer an alternative lens of looking Ethiopian

political problem and solution.

Though the very term hegemony has a long history, it was more pronounced with the publication of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison notebooks*. Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) had developed hegemony theory in diagnosing the success story of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the impossibility and in some cases the miscarriage of such revolution in Western societies. In this regard, he came up with the concept of *war of movement* and *war of position*.

Gramsci notion of hegemony has two facets: hegemony and counter hegemony. In the first case, hegemony is "a theory of what ones adversaries have done". Hegemony refers to how a certain social group presents its interests as the general interest of the mass. It is about the establishment of legitimacy in which the mass accept unnatural state of affairs as a natural order (Ives, 2004, p. 6). Hegemony is thus "the consensual basis of an existing political system" and also "the formation and organization of consent" (Adamson, 1980, p. 170; Ives, 2004, p. 2). In the second case, Gramsci theorized hegemony in search of an alternative strategy to challenge what he called "bourgeoisie hegemony". In this sense, Gramsci theorization of hegemony is "a theory of what to be done" or what Cox (1993) calls "a theory of counter hegemony".

Gramsci came up with two counter hegemony strategies: *war of movement* and *war of position*. "War of position" is a fought of "... a long period in the super-structure, in which *meanings* and *values* become the object of struggle" (Jones, 2006, p. 31, *Emphasis added*) while "war of movement" is a slow process of undermining the "common sense" base of the hegemonic power and in so doing it creates and strengthens the social foundation of the new order

Coming to the concept of elite, Pareto as quoted in Ambedkar (1992, p. 253) defined it as "the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity" and classified as "governing elite and non-governing elite". The elites, for this paper, are most often a small influential and powerful group consisting of those who hold disproportionate amount of wealth, privilege, political power, intellectual skill, military, and media who control and aspire to control the State in its totality, which is to be called State capture. As politics is, to use Harold Lasswell (1936, p. 295) definition, the "the study of who gets what, when and how", "the study of influence and the influential", the elites are those who get the most. They are influential and dominant group holding and aspiring to hold political power where politics is constructed in an endless game of "winner takes all" rather than "win-win situation" conditioned by rule of law.

On the basis of this, Elite hegemony is an established or to be established *inequitable state of affairs* achieved and maintained through coercion and consent. Hegemony as a theory of "how to stay in power", Elite hegemony uses hard and soft power strategies and tactics so as to maintain and consolidate its hegemonic position. In contrast, hegemony, as a theory of "how to undermine hegemonic power", calls for the establishment of a new historic block through soft power. This means that non-hegemonic groups must build a new historic block so as to win the battle and must use smart power, a combination of hard and soft power (Nye, 2008, p. 94). But, the hegemonic power will always employ a combination of "carrots, sticks, and attraction" to suppress counter-hegemony movements and to maintain the status quo. This is particularly true in elite hegemony of Ethiopian political landscape.

Nevertheless, elite hegemony is multi-layered. Elite hegemony may have the blessing of the global hegemonic power of the time and local non-state actors. In Ethiopia politics, for instance, the three successive regimes inaugurated their hegemonic power on external legitimacy. US was the patron of the imperial regime. According to Lyons (1986), U.S.-Ethiopian relations from 1950 to the mid-1960s were based on a patron-client

relationship. The military Derg regime was also backed and blessed by the Soviet Union. TPLF came to the office through the support of US and now the regime is client of the traditional hegemonic power, US, and the newly emerging power, China.

On the other hand, at local level, institutions, civil society organizations, media and intellectuals may play a role of indoctrination and thereby convince non-hegemonic groups about the inevitability, appropriateness, justice, and natural order of existing state of affairs. The elite hegemony also attempts to create a normative agreement and institutions so as to advance its interest and maintain the state of affairs. As Cox (1993, p. 62) has noted normative instruments, institutions, and media are mechanisms through which hegemony is expressed, institutions such as media and covenants such as constitution are mechanisms through which the ideas, ideology, and discourse of a hegemonic power are expressed. Even in the first place, institutions might be hegemonic creation and thus they represent norms that hasten and legitimate the expansion of hegemonic order (Cox, 1993, p. 62). Thus, institutions can be the mirror and by products of the hegemony. As a mirror they reflect the colour of the hegemonic power and as a creation of the hegemony they act as the priest of the hegemon with the function of indoctrination. Without question, a hegemonic fabricated institution may serve as a baptizer and indoctrinator of the hegemony.

They have also a role of knowledge construction that can consolidate hegemonic situation via sanctioning discourse, “the prevailing or dominant discourse that has been legitimized by the discursive elite ...at any moment in time. It ...leads to the creation of a dominant belief system or paradigm” (Turton, 2000, p. 4).

The hegemony elites always stand as a genuine, eternal representer, and protector of the public interest but the public remains a means for certain ends of the elite. Since hegemony is always contestable, there will be resistance at all times. However, the hegemonic power will incessantly work to convince the mass to subscribe and comply with the values and norms created by them that are inherently inequitable. Nevertheless, the dominant group can never manufacture consent in its complete form. In history, there is no “apparent consent” to hegemonic created state of affairs but only “veiled consent” that can be explained by several reasons. Having adopted a Gramscian framework of hegemony, this paper attempts to shed light on Ethiopian political discourse and narratives.

### **Anatomy of Missed Opportunities for Change: Trends, Causes, and Failures**

Emperor Menelik II had created the present day Ethiopia by carrot-stick empire formation strategies. The twin projects of State-building and Nation-building have thus become the home work of his successors. Nevertheless, his successors mainly the imperial regime and military Derge regime had failed successfully in completing nation-building projects left by the empire builder Menelik. The current “revolutionary democratic” model of Nation-building is also failed in creating a viable democratic and prosperous State. In this trajectory of Nation-building, one of the dilemmas that remain controversial is incessant hoped-for-reform attempts and their subsequent failure in transforming the Ethiopian State towards inclusiveness and democratic order. Paradoxically, they created new dictators who are more brutal and repressive than their predecessors. This section therefore explores anatomy of missed opportunities for transformation in light of the country’s political history and elite hegemony perspectives. Accordingly, I classified the missed opportunities into five categories: Lij Iyasu’s aborted integrative nation-building approach, 1950/2 tripled opportunity and antithetical constitutional revision, 1974 drafted/aborted constitution and the hijacked revolution, the 1991 failed negotiated

transition, and the 2005 national election

**Lij Iyasu's aborted integrative nation-building approach.** Lij Iyasu was the designated heir of the throne but uncrowned monarch of Ethiopia (1913-1916). Internally, it was a period of incessant power struggle among elites for power and influences in order to (re)establish their preferred elite hegemonic status quo. The modernization policy of his predecessor was also at initial stage. Building of State institutions with its capacity acceptable and legitimate for all, and creation of a shared and collective identity were inherited assignments of Lij Iyasu. Externally, Ethiopia was an independent state island surrounded by colonialists mainly the "three big European powers" who were party to the treaty of tripartite alliance.

Lij Iyasu was the first ruler who adopted an effective but idealistic response to both the internal and external challenges. Internally, he attempted to change the political chemistry and political physiology of the State forever. Externally, to break Ethiopia's colonial encirclement he saw the First World War as an opportunity; he allied with central powers (Germany, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary) (Marcus, 1994).

The major departure of Lij Iyasu's policy was his integrative nation building strategy aimed at creating social, religious, regional, and ethnic equality. Lij Iyasu was the first ruler in attempting to integrate the periphery into the Ethiopian polity. Scholars (Zewude, 2002; Sarbo, 2009) contend that he had followed an integration approach of nation-building. In his short-lived period, Lij Iyasu gave more attention to the south-eastern region of Ethiopia. He traveled so many times to Jijjiga area. Bahru (2002, pp. 126-127) argued that Lij Iyasu's south-eastern policy was "an integrative approach towards the Somali". According to Marcus,

Iyasu was often gone from Addis Abeba, taking long journeys into the countryside, where he hunted and visited his subjects and sought to construct a political coalition independent of the men who had built and sustained Menilek's empire. He disregarded the permanency of the old emperor's new capital. (Marcus, 1994, p. 63)

In his south-eastern policy, he made three things. Abdullah Sadeq was appointed as the governor of Ogaden (Bahru, 2002). This was a major move in making the periphery administer their region. Second, Lij Iyasu transformed the traditionally held belief of successive Ethiopian emperors. He wanted to end the second class status of Ethiopian Muslims. For this, he constructed mosques and made a marriage relation with Muslims. The marriage symbolically represents the divorce of core-periphery alienation, Muslim-Christian privileges, and second class status. Thirdly, Lij Iyasu also gave "material and moral support to Sayyid Muhammad Abdille Hasan, the Somali patriotic leader who had been challenging British and Italian colonial rule since the turn of the century" (Bahru, 2002, p. 127).

Lij Iyasu was also the first in standing against injustice, inequality, and inequitable traditional status quo. In his state building, he made progressive measures. He institutionalized a police force, ended *quragna system* and the abuses of the *leba shay* (Bahru, 2002).

His nation-building strategy was a major departure. He began the nation-building project through liberal plus accommodative policy. According to McClellan (1996, p. 58), "Lij Iyasu recognized the need to build a broader multi-ethnic nation". Like his predecessors mainly the Shewa dynasty, he used political marriage as an instrument for peaceful nation-building.

Nevertheless, Lij Iyasu's integrative approach of nation-building was not blessed by the Shewan elites, church, and "the three big European powers". He had taken radical measurement against traditionally nobility and replaced them with his own appointees (Marcus, 1994). He also referred them as "my

grandfather's fattened sheep" (Mars'e-Hazen as quoted in Zewude, 2002, p. 123). The disappointed and unhappy Shewan elite accused Lij Iyasu. All of his accusations were emanated from his integration motive he pursued; for instance Ras Terefi, the later Emperor Haile Sellassie, gave the Shewan nobility several proofs of Iyasu's conversion to Islam. Generally, his policies created enemies for him at different fronts. His alliance with Turkey also antagonized the three big European powers. His accommodative policy also antagonized the church. Finally, the three forces created collusion against him and deposed through a palace coup d'état in 1916.

Shewan engineered coup d'état of 1916 had aborted Lij Iyasu's accommodative nation-building strategy aimed at building a legitimate multi-ethnic Ethiopia. According to Merera,

...the sad part of the 1916 coup was its termination of the balanced post-empire religious, regional, and ethnic policy of the Ethiopian regime, which, although not well articulated, could have charted a new path for the evolution of Ethiopia's multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural polity and could as well have saved the country from some of its late-twentieth-century crises. (Merera, 2003, p. 146)

With this Ethiopia had lost the first golden opportunity of "building a multiethnic Ethiopia on a balanced foundation" (Merera, 2003, p. 146). This was a period in which Ethiopia's multicultural makeup was recognized and attempted to build on equal basis without regional, religious, and ethnic disparity. Nevertheless, Lij Iyasu's successors had followed an antithesis of accommodative nation-building policy aimed at centralization-cum-modernization.

In the political history of Ethiopia, it was the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie that institutionalized a centralized State and followed elite-driven Nation-building. It introduced a reform that basically affected state apparatus. Modern State institutions including the three organs of government were established in antithetical manner of the doctrine of separation of power. The State-building process had not brought a separation of the State, church, the monarch. Thus, State institutions were seen as a legitimate instrument of the three major players. The regime had followed a centralization and modernization policy of Nation-building and modern education was also used to create new class of elite.

The primary motive of the regime was ending the problem of power succession via centralization. By drawing lesson from the endless power struggle since the physical illness of Emperor Menelik II, Ras Teferi the later Emperor Haile Slassie wanted to change problem of succession to the throne forever. He had used two inseparable mechanisms: modernization and centralization. The progressive elite led by Ras Teferi had won the battle of "elite struggle" by defeating the traditional conservatists. Since then the political developments of the country were dominated by the self-proclaimed pre-war modernizing elites, the Japanizers.

The eternal solution to problem of succession came in 1931. Instead of a covenant of citizens, governor and governed, the 1931 constitution had come as Haile Selassie's gift out of his good will for his subjects (Alebachew, 2009). Against the backdrop of Iyasu's nation-building strategy, the constitution had institutionalized the center-periphery demarcation. The peripheries were ruled by the appointed elites from the center. This also led to a huge disparity and inequality between center and periphery, garrison towns and rural areas, the elite of the center and peripheral elites.

The constitution also granted a power for the emperor "to establish personal estates (reste-guelt)"<sup>2</sup>. The constitution offers an eternal solution of problem of succession to the throne which can be read as "...the

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<sup>2</sup> Ethiopian Constitution of 1931, 16th July 1931; Chapter 2 article 15.

imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of his majesty Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of the Menlik I, son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and queen Sheba.”<sup>3</sup>

Rather than being a legitimate supreme law of the land, the constitution was an instrument of centralization and absolutism. The emperor was a chief legislator, executive, and judge. It established inequitable hegemonic status quo in favor of the elite: the imperial royal family, nobilities, church, and other affiliated groups. This had institutionalized the inseparability of church, State, government, and the King. The regimes legitimacy was emanated mainly externally. All in all, the centralization-cum-modernization model of nation-building had failed successfully. The pre-war modern elite’s mission of “Japanizing Ethiopia” couldn’t progress the State.

**1950/2 tripled opportunity and subsequent antithetical constitutional revision.** The second missed opportunity for change was the 1952 Ethio-Eritrea federation and subsequent antithetical constitutional revision. On 2nd December 1950, the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Federal Act, a resolution that recommends Eritrea to be “an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown” (UN General Assembly, 1950). With this Ethiopia became a defacto federal state theoretically.

Nevertheless, there were several paradoxes. First, the Federal Act had established the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia which was in contrary to Ethiopian highly centralized unitary State structure. The provisions of the federal act were fully incorporated in the 1952 Eritrean constitution. The Federal act and Eritrean constitution ensured self-rule and shared rule. Eritrea was an autonomous unit with its own administration having legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of government. There was a clear-cut separation of power between the federal government and Eritrea regional government. On the other hand, the 1952 Eritrean constitution was drafted in light of liberal democracy and incorporated universal bills of rights and the Federal Act provisions. This constitution was ratified by Ethiopia on 11th august 1952 and entered into force after a month<sup>4</sup>. Both the federal act and Eritrean constitution clashed embarrassingly with the 1931 Ethiopian constitution and the political ideology of the regime itself.

Second, there were constitutional contradictions. The 1931 Ethiopian constitution contravenes the newly Eritrean constitution of 1952 which was ratified by Ethiopia. The Eritrean constitution codified “free, fair and period election”, recognizes fundamental human rights, and Self and shared rule. Sadly, these elements were considered as a threat to the unquestioned and uncontrolled power of the emperor in Ethiopia.

Third, there was theoretical and practical contradiction between federalism and the federal arrangement created by the Federal Act. Theoretically, federalism is based on self-rule and shared rule (Elazar, 1995). It has at least two layers of government namely federal government and regional governments with a clear separation of power. In the Ethio-Eritrean federation, the central government was monarchical and absolutist while Eritrea was an autonomous regime. Thus, there were two separate governments based on entirely different principles.

Eritrea was a regional autonomy but this right of self-government was absolutely denied to other regions in Ethiopia. Paradoxically, other regions were ruled by appointed elites from center. Eritrea was organized based on a democratic principle which was at variance with Ethiopia. In this case, the elites of the hegemonic

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<sup>3</sup> Supra note 2, Chapter I article 3.

<sup>4</sup> Eritrean Constitution, 11th August 1952.



state of affairs were inspired not to grant regional autonomy for other provinces but to undermine the powers of the Eritrean government and bring it under the control of the central government.

In its face value, the three factors namely Ethio-Eritrea federation, 1952 Eritrean constitution, and the demand of emerging elites could be seen as a golden opportunity to transform Ethiopian State from highly centralized unitary into federation, absolute constitution into constitutional monarchy, and absolutism to parliamentary democracy. Sadly, the regime had used the opposite direction because these aforementioned factors were seen by the then elites as a threat to their hegemonic status quo. Consequently, they entered into the second constitutional engineering not to make a constitutional State but to kill the seeds brought by Federal Act, Eritrean constitution, and demands of progressive elites. Instead of codifying the Federal Act and Eritrean constitution, the elite in charge of constitutional revision intended to prevent both the Eritrean Constitution and the Federal Act from arresting Emperor Haile Selassie's centralization program.

More than its predecessor, the 1955 revised constitutions legalized and solidified absolutism. It reinforced the process of centralization program that started in the 1930's. The first two chapters dealt with the issues of succession to the throne and power of the emperor respectively. Instead of popular sovereignty like the Eritrean constitution ratified by the emperor himself the revised constitution codified imperial sovereignty<sup>5</sup>. This constitution was not more than the reaffirmation of the power and prerogatives of the emperor as "a sacred king sent from God to rule Ethiopia". The constitutional revision can be best explained as "adding new problems".

The challenge comes after five years. The federation was dissolved and led to an organized secessionist struggle and thereof Eritrea became an independent State in the 1991's. The demand for democracy and reform also led to the 1960s December aborted or failed *coup d'état* (Clapham, 1968). The coup was initially successful in the capital, as they took control of the imperial palace and detained the crown prince Asfa Wosen and cabinet ministers including the Ministers of Commerce, Defense, and the Interior. According to Clapham (1968, p. 496), on December 14, 1960, "the rebels secured control of most of Addis Ababa and drafted a proclamation, broadcast by Asfa Wasan, who is generally regarded as having acted under duress".

They announced the formation of a new government under Asfa wosen, and promised the start of a new era. They also issued an 11-point programme of proposed reforms and the newly appointed prime minister. The attempted reform also obtained the support of university students, who demonstrated in Addis Ababa in favor of the coup that promised to institute a new government.

Nevertheless, the coup had failed to achieve popular support due to their inability to neutralize important opponent groups. The counterforce led by the regime loyalists had secured the support of the tank squadron and the air force, and the church. They also issued a letter signed by the Patriarch of the church condemning the rebels as anti-religious and reform traitors and calling for loyalty to the emperor. Consequently, the rebels were outgunned in a fighting that broke out on Thursday 15, December.

The coup was another failed opportunity (Levine, 2013). It is a reform within promising the establishment of a government that would improve the economic, social, and political position of the general population without eliminating the traditional authority in the person of the crown prince. Sadly, the coup's failure promoted the consolidation of imperial power and the outbreak of liberation fronts in the frontiers. Instead of giving solutions to the overgrowing grievances, the regime had rewarded those who defended the status quo

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<sup>5</sup> Constitution of Ethiopia, November 4, 1955, Article 26.

and punished the rebels which can be regarded as “adding new problems”. In general, the failure of the regime to make reforms had created new forms of organized struggle and question.

**The 1974 drafted constitution, failed negotiated transition and the hijacked revolution.** The 1960 aborted *coup d'états* was a clear sign for the need of reform. Though it was too little and too late, there was a reform attempt in the same year of the total extinction of the monarchical system in 1974. One such an attempt was the 1974 Draft/Aborted Constitution, modeled based on the constitutional monarchy of western democracy with meaningful separation of power and check and balance mechanisms. The constitution was another missed opportunity in changing absolute monarchy into constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy.

The 1974 drafted/aborted constitution was a constitutional breakthrough in the political history of the country. It changed absolute monarchy into constitutional monarch<sup>6</sup>, imperial sovereignty into popular sovereignty<sup>7</sup>. Council of Ministers headed by the prime minister was made a supreme organ. It also introduced a clear separation of power with check and balance among the three organs. The constitution also paved the way for party pluralism. Article 29: “all Ethiopians have the right to establish or be member of any association including political parties”<sup>8</sup>. It had also introduced a transition mechanism from absolute constitution to constitutional monarchy.

In this case, it can be argued that the 1974 drafted constitution could save Ethiopia from the 17 years military regime and the holocaust of red terror. The constitution was an attempt to compromise the polarized and contradictory interest of the traditional elite under their patron, the Emperor, and the military elites who take over the revolution. It was a mechanism of paying a peaceful path of the revolution. This could lead a negotiated transition. Nevertheless, hopes were despaired when the Derg rejected the drafted constitution. Instead of approving the drafted constitution the military junta adopted a new proclamation No. 1/1974 which suspended the 1955 Constitution and established Provisional Military Government-Proclamation. The proclamation left the country to be ruled for 13 years without a meaningful social contract. Rather the military regime had finished all the business with outnumbered proclamations.

On the other hand, the political and social forces that bring the revolution had neither a common plan nor their own plan after regime change. They were divided based on interest and ideological grounds. What they had in common was their intended goal of “ending the old regime”. When the actual revolution was erupted, there was no political force to lead the revolution in a revolutionary way. Among the forces that are calling and fighting the end of the old regime since the 1960s no one was prepared to lead the revolution in a right track. Gudina (2003, p. 150) argued that “when the revolution broke out in February 1974, in the absence of a credible, organized civilian opposition, the military, by exploiting the power vacuum, easily took over the leadership of the revolution”. Absence of strong civilian party with the will and commitment of leading, directing and handling the revolution had ultimately brought the country into the controls of the military junta, the non-revolutionary forces (Zewude, 2002, p. 228). The result was miserably bad: neither transforms the state into the state of equality nor brings economic development and prosperity.

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<sup>6</sup> The draft of the proposed Ethiopian constitution, 1974, Article 5(1).

<sup>7</sup> *Supra Note 7*, Article 1(2) states that the people of Ethiopia are the source of power. Article 1(2) codified the inseparability of the State from the popular sovereignty of the people.

<sup>8</sup> *Supra Note*, Article 29 stated that “any Ethiopian can establish, be a member of whatever organizations including political parties except it is intended to attack Ethiopian unity based on religion, ethnicity or other factors”.

**The 1991 failed negotiated transition.** The two long-standing questions of modern Ethiopia, *question of nationality* and *land*, had led to the 1974 revolution. The military Derge regime had attempted to answer the twin questions via adoption of socialism as a guiding ideology. The issue of land was solved partly by the 1975 land proclamation. The question of nationality has become more intense and led to the demise of the regime and ensuing establishment of Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) in 1991 foreshadowing a complete shift to “*ethnic sanctity*”.

The 1991 July conference was a major turning point in laying down the foundational base of democratizing the State. The conference had adopted the Transitional Charter, an interim constitution, of the transition period. It has also established a TGE with a responsibility of ensuring a successful democratic transition of peaceful transfer of power based on “free and fair” democratic election. The Transitional charter had incorporated democratic principles and fundamental human rights. This was seen as a new “big promise of democracy”.

The Transitional Charter proclaimed “a new chapter” for state rebuilding and democratic restructuring of the State towards “full democracy” (Gazeta, 1991). The three democratic litmus tests for TGE were to conduct “free and fair” democratic election to the Constituent Assembly, an inclusive and transparent drafting and adoption of a new constitution, and democratic transition of power to the party or coalition of parties who gain majority in the assembly.

Nevertheless, an initial hope for democracy has come to being despaired when the transition process was manipulated by the dominant party—Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) under Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) hegemonic leadership. Its keen interest was establishing a hegemonic status quo under TPLF leadership. Instead of building a democratic system, the practice of EPRDF was against the very *raison d’être* of democracy. Gudina argued that:

During the whole period of the transition, the ruling party’s main concern appears to have been not the building of democratic institutions and their institutionalization, but intimidation and marginalization of the opposition, repression of the emerging civil society and the independent press, and so on, on the one hand, and the building of its own institutions of control, all aimed at consolidation of power, on the other. (Gudina, 2003, p. 152)

The failure had reached its climax level with the 1992/1993 election to the Constituent Assembly. Initially, the election was supposed to be “a sign of democracy” and “a new beginning of history”. However, pre-election intimidation and election deception were the non-democratic manifestation of the 1992/1993. Thus, the first-hoped-for-democratic election remains flawed. EPRDF had won 89.3% of the seats (Gudina, 2003). Since the first election, all elections conducted so far are similar in a number of ways. Election intimidation, fraud, deception, and polarization are the hallmark features of election in post-1991 Ethiopia.

Consequently, the drafting process and adoption of the new constitution was far from democratic process and procedures. The drafting process of the new constitution was nontransparent (Gudina, 2003). Similarly, Vestal (1996) labeled the constitution as EPRDF *Kitab* and the drafters as the *Debteras* of the EPRDF.

The TGE “big promise of democracy” had come to complete failure with the closing of the transition. The transition had come to an end with 1995 national regional election. Likewise, EPRDF had won 90.1% of the seat (Gudina, 2003). Despite the constitutional provision of multi-party system, parliamentary democracy, free and fair election, fundamental human rights, the practice of the regime is against the backdrop of these democratic principles and values. Principled multiparty system remains an ideal scenario. Instead EPRDF

had paradoxically institutionalized dominant single party system. The regime had gradually removed opposition political parties systematically and undemocratically. OLF had left the coalition and became galleria fighters.

Thus, the hoped-for 1993/1994 national election, the drafting process of the new constitution, and building of state institutions have failed from the outset. All in all, the transition had failed in changing the theory into practice and building of a viable democratic state remains an ideal scenario.

**2005 national election: Democratizing breakthrough and another failure.** Another democratic breakthrough was the 2005 national election. Since the failed negotiated transition of 1991 to the second democratic breakthrough of 2005 national election, the only exceptional period of less repressiveness of the regime was during the Ethio-Eritrean war of 1998-2000. The 2000 election was also concluded in a similar fashion of previous elections. Nevertheless, the year 2005 was supposed to be a new march of history at least in the following reasons.

First, during the eve of election, the regime itself wanted to improve its repressive behavior in human right records and media. For this, the regime showed initial willingness and commitment to make the 2005 national election “a surge toward political pluralism” (Levine, 2013, p. 8). Second, pre-election period was more democratic than before. Opposition political parties had better access to the State-controlled media. For the first time, the electorates have got a chance to hear the views and alternative policies of all competing parties. Third, as compared with the previous elections, the 2005 election was conducted with less difficulty. In their report of election observation, The Carter Center concludes that:

the May elections [2005] marked an historic event in the country, as Ethiopia witnessed its first genuinely competitive campaign period with multiple parties fielding strong candidates. Unfortunately, election day was followed by flawed counting...postelection violence ...a significant delay in finalizing election results; and an ineffective complaints review and investigation processes. (Carter Center, 2009, p. 3)

Thus, the election was hoped to be a proof of democratic order. Nevertheless, as usual it has become part of the “successful failures”. Post-election period was controversial. Unlike the pre-election and election period which are proved to be democratic than ever, post-election period became controversial. Instead of accepting election result, ensuring peaceful transition of power and abided by the law of the country, EPRDF has chosen undemocratic alternatives. This led to the outbreak of new violence. Professor Ezekiel noted that:

the relatively competitive national elections of 2005 was another conjuncture to accept the election results and negotiate transferring to or sharing power with the opposition. Characteristically, the EPRDF leader used the opportunity to obliterate the opposition, encourage political polarization and firmly install an authoritarian regime to rule indefinitely. Windows for the long-awaited democracy were subsequently shattered and turned into occasions for valorization of violence.<sup>9</sup> (Ezekiel, 2018)

The election remains disputed elections concluded with violence and bloodshed. Dozens of opposition leaders along with media and civil society activists were arrested. In the post-election period, the regime becomes more brutal and repressive. It enacted two laws, the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 and Anti-Terrorism Law Proclamation No. 652/2009. While the civil society law impedes the role of civil societies in the democratization process of the country, the more controversial anti-terrorism law narrowed the democratic space as it is used by the regime to target members of opposition political parties, human right defenders, and journalists. From this one can conclude that in the aftermath of failure to institutionalize

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<sup>9</sup> <http://addisstandard.com/in-depth-analysis-managing-political-transition-in-ethiopia-the-choice-factor/>.

democracy, the regime tended to enact undemocratic laws and become more repressive than ever.

### **Current Hoped for Democratic Transition**

The countrywide protest since the 2014 has opened the door to internal political reforms. With the coming to power of the reformist Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia has got new opportunity: democratic transition and consolidation. He has introduced unprecedented reforms that have not only domestic but also regional implication. One of the availed opportunities is the attempt to follow an indigenous nation-building and democratization models: *Medemer* or Synergism. From grassroots perspectives, it can be argued that “a foreign solution to indigenous problem” and “a top-down” democratization and development approach are the two major underlying causes of “a successful failure” under the three successive regimes. Both the modernization program of “Japanizing Ethiopia” of the imperial regime and Socialism of the military Derge regime had failed to create a prosperous and an inclusive democratic Ethiopia.

The EPRDF also followed the path of its predecessors with a cosmetic change. Instead of a bottom-up approach, EPRDF has followed top-down democratization with its sponsored democratic developmental State and revolutionary democracy models. Bach (2011, p. 648) argued that “the state...creates organizations, leaders, and vanguard elites who all spread and impose the party’s ideology”. In this approach, there is no distinction between the state, the ruling party, and the government as they are fused together. Rather democracy has become just a spiritual nature and left the people disillusionment (Hagmann & Abbink, 2011). Bach (2011, p. 653) concludes that “Abyotawi democracy seems neither revolutionary nor democratic”. Thus, revolutionary democracy has a double failure: it brings neither democracy nor development too. On the other hand, EPRDF is attempting to democratize the country without a democratic EPRDF.

Nowadays, the Prime Minister introduced his philosophy of *Medemer*, Synergy, to follow an indigenous approach to transform the State. However, *Medemer* itself is not yet blessed by TPLF, masters of EPRDF, and other political forces. This may exacerbate the existing division in the party.

In addition, it can be argued that the transition period has promised opportunity for change: to follow negotiated transition, reform the state, integrative nation-building approach, and to forge national consensus. Nevertheless, the transition process is not peaceful. Rather it has faced challenges at home and abroad. Thus, the polemical question is that whether the current democratic transition will success (bring democratic consolidation) or fail (reversion to authoritarianism). If the first scenario is possible it will be a new beginning of history; if not it will be part of the past “successful failure”. In light of this, the following section attempts to analyze the constraints behind such failures with the intent of drawing lesson for current democratic transition the country has undergone.

**Malign multilayered polarization and elite hegemony.** Polarization and elite hegemony are the two underlying factors behind the missed opportunities for change. In Ethiopia, there is a divergent political view, interests, ideologies on the basis of ethnicity, and nationalism in which one is viewed as the existential threat of the other. The prevailed polarization can be distinguished as elite polarization, diaspora polarization, political party polarization, and other social forces polarization. In its very nature, these polarizations are multilayered, malign than benign and antithesis of societal transformation.

First, there is a historic continuity of incessant hegemonic aspiration of elite based politics. According to Gudina (2003), the distinctive characteristics feature of the elite since the day of the modern Ethiopian history is lack of political will, playing a zero-sum game politics, lack of the art of compromise, obscured vision,

propensity for hegemony, vanity of grandeur, and failure to learn from the past mistakes and history. Since the day of modern Ethiopian history, the dominant elites have chosen a winner-takes-all approach of politics than a principled politics based on negotiation and give-take. The elite has polarized and never reconciled hegemonic discourse, narrative, and interest. The elite always aspires hegemonic status quo, business as usual, of different types at a different period in time. Moreover, the elites have no culture of compromise and principled politics. In this case, Gudina (2003, p. 160) strongly recommend that abandoning the elite “hegemonic aspiration and its zero-sum game politics” be crucial in transforming Ethiopian politics.

Thus, the missed opportunities for change are failed due to the elite hegemonic aspiration than creation of a pluralist democratic system. This is an inherited political sin of the post-1991 ruling and contending elites. Politics of division and conspiracy was the hallmark features of the 1991 TGE. EPRDF used conspiracy and diversionary theory in order to exclude its opponents during the transition period and in the 2005 failed election. Currently, the leading elite of ethno-nationalist vs. the Self-declared “Ethiopianist” has no culture of tolerance. They are interested in the win-lose political game than win-win.

The second malign polarization for societal transformation is diaspora and diaspora sponsored polarization. Ethiopian diaspora are mostly conflict-induced diaspora associated with regime change of 1974, 1991, and 2005 failed election (Lyons, 2007). As a result, they have strong reason for struggle against injustice and societal transformation from abroad (Horst, 2013). Ethiopian diaspora has been participating in the country’s politics since the 1960’s. They have contributed for the downfall of the military Derg regime and brought the current reform within EPRDF (Alebachew, 2018). Nevertheless, they are fragmented too along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines. They have polarized views. In this case, one can argue that diaspora is also contributing for the country’s polarized political views. They are “conflict generating” actors.

Fourth, there is an emergent polarization which I call “other social forces polarization”. The *Qero*, *Fano*, and other youth-based forces are major actors for the current change. Along this, different civic association has been created. Nevertheless, now these social forces have been politicized. On the one hand the ruling party and opposition parties on the other hand ethno-nationalists and self-proclaimed Ethiopianists want to use these social forces as an instrument. Gradually these social forces inherited the polarized political sin of the major contending political actors.

Third, another substantive malign polarization is found within the political parties. Political polarization, fragmentation, and lack of common agenda and aspiration on societal goal are the hallmark features of Ethiopian political parties (Gudina, 2007). Currently, the polarization is largely on the viable forms of federalism as a way of restructuring the State. Some advocate the current ethnic federalism while others contend that the current federalism is a threat for unity and recommend restructuring the state along with other variants of federalism. However, they never agree on the alternative ways of federation. Some advocate geographical federalism which is seen as a threat to the right of “nations, nationalities and people” by the ethno-nationalists. Others recommend a basin-based federalism. For instance, Bunare and Lulu (2018) have developed an alternative mechanism of restructuring the State based on river basin hydrological boundary. They divided the administrative States into eight regional States namely Abay basin state, Awash, Ayisha and Denakil basins state, Baro-Akobo basin state, Genele-Dawa basin state, Tekeze and Mereb basins state, Wabi-shebele and the Ogaden basins state, Omo-Ghibe basin state, and Rift valley Lakes basin state. Thus, absence of consensus on the viable way of restructuring the State can be seen as a challenge to transform the State.

**Inherited problem of the past generations.** The current leading elites have inherited the problem of the past generations. Among the transcended political sin to the current elite the major one is politics of rivalry and killing for power, conspiracy, and politics of division. Politics of rivalry was as old as Solomonic dynasty. The conspiracy and division was evident during Emperor Zear Yacob reign. In most cases, the causes of the death for several Emperors including empress Zewuditu were unknown.

This kind of politics was transcended to modern Ethiopia. After the death Emperor Menelik II, there was an endless rivalry and competition among the elite of Shewa, Wollo, and Gonder. Initially, it was solved by Shewa-Wollo coalition. Later the Shewan stands against the Wollo elite and deposed Lij Iyasu. Ras Teferi became crowned king by removing empress Zewuditu. Derge also made the same thing. The division among TPLF and the systematic removal of OLF from transitional government are the classical examples of post-1991 politics of conspiracy and division. Current reform is also not immune from politics of division. TPLF has lost its hegemony over EPRDF. *Medemer* is not yet blessed by the old hegemon, TPLF, nor by the other political forces. This culture of rivalry for power is an inherited problem of current elite which is against the very essence of democracy.

**Lack of principled politics based on negotiation, win-win, and give-take.** Lack of principled politics is a challenge of all the successive regimes. Politics in its essence implies negotiation based on principle of win-win, give, and take, on “who gets what, when and where”. Against the backdrop, the foundational base of Ethiopian politics is “winners take all”. A win-lose political principle is what the hegemonic elite takes the State power for its group. Emperor Hailesslassie had taken the State power by eliminating all his potential contenders including the empress. He was legislator, executive, and judge in chief. Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam had legalized the politics of murder and made the same thing. An internal division and conspiracy within the Derg resulted execution of Genral Teferi Benti, Colonel Atnafe Abate, and many of their supporters. After removing perceived threats, Mengistu became president of the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE), Secretary General of the Workers Party of Ethiopia, and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Meles Zenawi had done the same thing. Thus, Ethiopia is still awaiting a generation that can break the old game and transcend the political sin rooted in Ethiopian politics.

**Contested political history and prolonged national consensus.** As far as history is concerned, there is contestation which has been major source of controversies in the modern Ethiopian political landscape. History is used as a means to certain ends: interest of the elite at the expense of the people’s history. In this regard, what is needed is national consensus which is now either neglected and not given due attention.

### Concluding Remarks

By adopting elite hegemony as analytical framework, I attempted to examine the trends and challenges of State and societal transformation in the modern Ethiopian political history. Since the completion of the state formation in the 1990’s, State-building and Nation-building have failed successfully. In the trajectory of nation-building, there are five grand missed chances for societal transformation. In all attempted hoped-for opportunities for change, the elite has followed a winner-takes-all approach of politics than “a negotiated transition” based on principled politics of win-win. Thus, all hoped-for-reform attempts are hijacked by the then elite aspiring hegemonic leadership, business as usual, and paradoxically it replaced new dictators who are more repressive and brutal than their predecessors.

Based on this, the study implies that there is an imperative to draw a lesson from past failures, which

includes avoiding aspiration of hegemonic status quo, playing principled politics of negotiation with genuine willingness, and commitment to compromise, prioritization of national interest and security, promotion of common aspirational goals such as peace, democracy, and development. Along this, three-level transformation is a prerequisite for making “failure of building of a viable State” end of history. Transformation of the Self or what I call decolonizing mind, Societal transformation based on their indigenous values and State transformation via negotiated transition and national consensus. Here national consensus and State transformation is possible only through the assertive move of epistemic community.

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